Supporting the

First Year Student Experience

Through the Use of

Learning Technologies

Edited by Kyriaki Anagnostopoulou and Deeba Parmar
on behalf of the ELFYSE special interest group

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the ELFYSE SIG community for their support and continuous engagement over the last two years. Thanks are also due to the Higher Education Academy and Middlesex University for providing the funding which has supported the ELFYSE SIG community and its activities. Specifically, we would like to thank:

- Professor James Wisdom, Visiting Professor of Learning and Teaching, Middlesex University
- Dr Martin Oliver, EvidenceNet E-Learning Team Leader, Higher Education Academy and Reader, Institution of Education
- Eddie Gulc, Senior E-learning Advisor, Higher Education Academy
- Joanne Mullarkey, Senior Administrative Assistant, Middlesex University.

In addition, we would like to thank those who have directly contributed examples and case studies of activities from across the FE and HE sectors. Particular thanks is due to colleagues who directly contributed to this publication:

- Claire Hamshire and W. Rod Cullen, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Sally Alsford, University of Greenwich
- Stephanie Brander, Robert Gordon University
- Marianne Cole, University of Cambridge CARET
- Becka Currant, University of Bradford
- Karen Fitzgibbon and Julie Prior, University of Glamorgan
- Sue Forder and Karen Vernon-Parry, Sheffield Hallam University
- James P. Garvey, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Graham Haines, Anita Norcott, Denise Buckley, Sarah Williams, Andrew Morgans and Helen Blockwell, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff
- Gavin Innes, Robert Gordon University
- Katy Mann, Julie Usher and Zoe Devlin, University of York
- Jessie Paterson, University of Edinburgh
- Mark Russell and Peter Bullen, University of Hertfordshire.

Supporting the

First Year Student Experience

Through the Use of

Learning Technologies

Created and edited on behalf of the e-Learning and the First Year Student Experience (ELFYSE) special interest group by

Kyriaki Anagnostopoulou
Head of Research, Innovation and Educational Technology

Deeba Parmar
Senior Research Fellow

November 2010

First published in 2010 by Middlesex University

ISBN 978-1-85924-319-0

A CIP catalogue record for this guide is available from
The British Library

Cover design and typesetting by Kyriaki Anagnostopoulou
Printed in the UK by CDS.

Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement
Middlesex University
Address: The Burroughs London NW4 4BT
Tel: 020 8411 5000
www.mdx.ac.uk

Table of Contents

Introduction

This guide is based on discussion and contributions by the E-learning and the First Year Student Experience (ELFYSE) special interest group (SIG).

ELFYSE SIG was supported by Middlesex University and the Higher Education Academy in 2009-10. It has provided a focus for practitioners involved in further and higher education as well as those who are interested in how learning technologies can support the first-year experience and the challenges which face institutions and students. Specifically, these are: transition, retention and progression.

This guide will be of interest to both academic and support staff who contribute to the first-year experience for students: e-learning managers, learning technologists, widening participation managers, induction leaders, student achievement advisors and those implementing enhancement initiatives for the student experience. Bringing together the areas of e-learning and student transition, retention and progression, this guide draws on both theory and practice to provide recommendations for and guidance to both academic and support staff on using learning technologies to support the first-year student experience. It is designed to help you think about ways of approaching and incorporating the use of learning technologies to support and enhance your students' first-year experience.

The materials provided here include:

- Case studies from the sector
- Recommendations for various stakeholders and
- An overview commentary. We have highlighted within the text the case studies which feature in this booklet.

Supporting the growth of learners through the use of technology

Emphasising the importance of the first year

Students entering further and higher education are embarking on an exciting but often challenging journey. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly recognising the vital role they play in proactively supporting the student life cycle, from the time they enter the institution through to completion, graduation and employment. However, with the increasing diversity of the student population and the current financial and political situation, budgetary constraints as outlined by HEFCE (2008/10) are adding to the complexities which face both students and institutions alike. Institutions are therefore increasingly asked to demonstrate the impact of their approaches and initiatives and to maximise the efficiency of their current resources. This guide aims to review current practices of supporting students through the use of learning technologies.

An increasing desire to address issues of first-year retention, progression and achievement has led to a growing body of literature (Bean, 1990; Mackie, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993; Yorke and Longden, 2006) which identifies themes, timings and areas where support and consideration are required for the sector, institutions and students. The aim of this guide is therefore not to revisit this literature, drawing upon issues for withdrawal, but rather to pull together case studies of current practice in using learning technologies to support the first-year experience. Although the term 'student experience' has gained attention in recent years and continues to be used by institutions and policy groups (1994 Group, 2007; NUS, 2008) it was decided that the 'first year' specifically warranted the interest of this SIG, primarily due to the high numbers of students withdrawing during this period and the attention it has gained (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Yorke, 1999; Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2007).

It is recognised that for many students, technologies are part of their everyday life and thus institutions have been quick to utilise many commonly used technologies (such as social networking sites, second life, blogs, etc) to engage students (JISC, HEFCE, 2009) in contemplating higher education and to inform their decision-making process. Consequently, HEIs are supporting students' learning through the use of technologies by attempting to build upon the use of technologies in their personal lives and integrate them into their learning lives (for a review of the literature see Lefever and Currant (2010)). However, in order to do this, Tinto suggests that institutions need 'the willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success' (2002, pp.3).

From looking at current practice in the sector, based upon the case studies documented in this guide, it appears that HEIs are using technologies to support and inform their students broadly in the following ways and for the following issues:

To help or manage issues of retaining students

- **In response to retention concerns**

Many institutions are using their virtual learning environment (VLE), and in particular their tracking data, to learn more about the ways in which their students are engaging with their academic studies through their VLE usage. This is demonstrated in the Managing Connections project (Anagnostopoulou and Parmar, 2008). It is acknowledged that this provides only a snapshot of data but it can be used a) to inform academics about topics and areas for concern, by looking at students' usage, and b) to understand the timing of interests by examining when

students access and engage with particular content or VLE tools (such as pre-assessment periods, etc) in order to inform their curriculum design.

Furthermore, Russell and Bullen's case study shows how their VLE was instrumental in the redesign of a module because of high failure rates, through the use of bespoke technology. Compulsory weekly online assessments were embedded within the module to encourage student engagement with both the curriculum and the VLE. Using a combination of performance data and examination of student satisfaction, pass rates have increased, as have the numbers of retained students. Brander (2010) also emphasises the need for student engagement and illustrates how staff are engaging large cohorts of students during teaching through the use of a Personal Response Systems (PRS). Students who are required to answer questions at regular intervals during a lecture period are more actively engaged in the process rather than passively 'acquiring knowledge'. A PRS is also a useful tool for the academic to gain a snapshot of understanding, opinion or satisfaction in order to inform their own teaching and delivery. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) encourage the use of technology to encourage active learning techniques and encourage academics to increase opportunities to do so.

To help student progression

- **For research purposed to gather data and inform action**

In order to provide institutions with a more detailed picture of their students' engagement with the university, technologies are widely used to gather data. The annual National Student Survey collates anonymised information about the levels of student satisfaction from students within institutions around the UK through the use of an online questionnaire. Fitzgibbon and Prior (2010) have employed this approach, through the use of QuestionMark Perception software, at the University of Glamorgan to gather responses from all students within their own institution to learn about their 'wider' experiences. Gathering the data in this manner allows student anonymity whilst also allowing institutions to distribute questionnaires to large numbers of students in an attempt to gain an accurate picture of their views.

Similarly, Anagnostopoulou and Parmar (2008) reviewed tracking data from students who had withdrawn early in the academic year, in order to examine levels of engagement with their institution's VLE. This data has been used as evidence to support the importance of engagement with peers, staff and academic students through their use of the VLE.

- **To manage student expectations**

A common area where literature (Fisher and Hood, 1987; Kantis, 2000) has suggested that support is required is that of management of the transition to university. Many institutions are developing online materials that are designed to both manage expectations and ease students into their academic and social life (Alsford, 2010). The 'Bridging the Gap' project at Sunderland University and the 'Stepping Stones' project at Bournemouth University also do this. Currant's (2010) 'Develop Me!' materials illustrate the ways in which institutions are using their VLEs to engage with students prior to entry and to aid the development of the skills they will be building upon within higher education. The 'Develop Me!' example goes further to help prepare students for university life by encouraging them to network with each other through discussion boards and blogs.

The relationship students have with the academics on their programme is also considered to be key to the students' integration into their new student life/role (Thomas, 2002). Garvey (2010) demonstrates how this is being developed within a nursing programme. Students and academics communicate through a networking site (Ning) prior to entry, thus fostering a sense of belonging for the students before commencement of the programme.

The case studies from Alsford (2010) and Paterson (2010) are examples of the use of technologies to encourage students to reflect upon their learning through the transition period and to encourage the transferability of their academic skills through 'taster' type materials. These materials are not only there to manage expectations but also to encourage high expectations, as the case study by Russell and Bullen (2010) shows. Online materials are also available to help late starters integrate into the university by providing a virtual induction. By encouraging students to access pre-entry materials and engage with their peers, programme teams and academic materials all work towards students having a clearer understanding of what to expect from their life at university and a sense of integration prior to physically arriving on campus. This is particularly helpful for international students who can use the materials to help to bridge academic cultures and pedagogic approaches to teaching and learning (as Mann, Usher and Devlin's (2010a) work aims to do).

- **To spiral the induction period**

The case studies of Hamshire and Cullen (2010), Alsford (2010) and Garvey (2010) all note the importance of a spiralled induction drawing upon a blended approach of online and physical activities in order to be less content heavy in a short space of time. Some of the case studies

touch on ways in which students may be supported prior to entry; however, from existing literature (Parmar and Trotter, 2005) we are aware that the early student experience is crucial to whether students decide to remain at their selected institution. Therefore the induction period must go beyond what was once a content-heavy week of paperwork, talks from all of the students' services offered at the institution and freshers' parties. With the demographics of the student population showing increasing numbers of part-time, mature and international students, induction activities have to cater for the needs of the types of students the institution attracts.

Paterson (2010) and Cole (2010a) show how their initiatives encouraging the development of academic skills are spiralled throughout the whole of the first year to work in conjunction with the skills the students develop through applying themselves to their studies.

To aid student achievement

- **Building a threshold**

Designing the first-year curriculum often needs to address the issue of 'setting standards' so that all students are able to achieve the threshold (Maher, 2004). The skills of an incoming cohort often vary and institutions need to think in particular about how they will address the issue of transferring the skills of their students from the social context to the academic domain.

With the government's continued commitment to widening access to and participation in higher education, it is widely recognised that students are entering education from a variety of pathways. Their prior learning experiences and levels of academic capabilities differ greatly. In addition, due to the increasing diversity of the student body, many are entering university as 'first-generation students' - that is, they are the first within their families to go to university and therefore their exposure to teaching, learning and assessment in higher education is limited.

Mann, Usher and Devlin's (2010b) case study shows the approach from the University of York to raise the standard of their students' academic writing and to increase their understanding of issues surrounding plagiarism through the use of the software TurnItIn. Innes' (2010) case study looks at their endeavours to build the IT confidence of students entering a nursing and midwifery programme, which began over the summer months prior to entry. Cook and Leckey (1999) highlighted the importance of developing students' academic confidence, particular during the early stages of university life.

- **To develop learner autonomy**

An essential skill for graduates is that of developing learner autonomy. Many of the cases

reviewed within this guide have demonstrated ways in which this is embedded within their initiatives. The work of Haines et al (2010) shows a cross-institutional approach to promoting learner engagement through the use of Personal Development Portfolios. In identifying the employability skills required, students are required to evidence their development of these skills, make use of opportunities to reflect upon their progress, develop action plans and consider with support the necessary course of action. Forder and Vernon-Parry's (2010) approach adopts the use of an online diary, using writing blogs to encourage deeper learning and the development of their writing skills. By encouraging individual and group blogs, students are able to create a self-support network which aids other management and team-building skills.

Many of the initiatives that have been discussed are embedded within the students' academic programme. However, some run as a supplementary activity or prior to the start of the academic programme. From a student's perspective, their experience of their time at university is often grouped as a whole, although from an institution's perspective it very often consists of a huge number of segmented activities and strands (such as marketing, personal life, finance, academic issues at module/programme/department/institutional level). Student life is possibly becoming increasingly fragmented, as for increasing numbers of students their university experience is just one of many commitments they balance within their daily life. It is therefore important that institutions continue to increase the delivery of support in an integrated and holistic manner and by means of technologies with which students interact on a daily basis, thus bridging the gap between using technologies for both their social life and their learning life.

Examples from the sector

Pre enrolment

Sphere of academic integration

Activities in this area aim to promote:

- Academic achievement
- Personal development
- Academic self-esteem
- Enjoyment of the subject
- Enjoyment of study
- Identification with academic norms and values
- Identification with one's role as a student.

Bridging materials are offered to students a few months before they enroll. They provide generic and programme specific information and activities to help ease transition into higher education. These materials include:

- useful information and activities which aim to provide a realistic picture of what being a student involves and are written in a way which promotes a sense of belonging
- discussion boards, online chats and forums which aim to creating a sense of community.

Peer mentoring schemes have been established between HEIs and their partner colleges where undergraduates are mentoring students in further education who will soon be going to university. Mentoring activities are usually carried out online after an initial face-to-face 'meet and greet' session.

Podcasts of programme leaders welcoming new students to the university and to their courses are offered at a number of institutions. Often these contain 'top tips' from existing students on how to settle into university life and to succeed in their studies.

Sphere of social integration

Activities in this area aim to promote:

- Peer group associations
- Forming friendships
- Personal contact with staff
- Personal support networks
- Extra curricular activities.

Open days are often followed up with an online presence which aims to maintain momentum whilst creating a sense of community.

Social networking (i.e. Facebook) technologies are being used to creating a sense of community and belonging prior to students commencing their studies.

Virtual experiences are being offered via technologies such as 'Second Life' which offer virtual walk-throughs of campus facilities so as to increase familiarisation with the institution and provide further opportunities for interaction.

Activities become more

Induction week

First year

Spiralling induction activities which commence in the first week and extend throughout the first year often have an online component.

Online diagnostic testing for literacy and numeracy is increasingly popular. More capable students are referred to online materials to further develop their skills and less capable students are invited to attend workshops. If issues are identified with a cohort on a particular course then support is embedded with the curriculum.

Promoting reflection through the use of technology is common place. Practices include:

- the use of e-portfolios to structure and record personal development planning (PDP)
- online 'reality check' self-assessments (how am I doing, is this the right course for me, etc)
- the use of text messaging to record reflections on in class activities.

The use of **voting systems** in teaching has helped to engage particularly large groups in reflective activities and in discussion.

Learner development profiles

The bringing together of data from a number of different sources/institutional systems can facilitate the creation of a 'student profile'. This profile can provide a holistic view of a learner's experience (i.e. not compartmentalised in modules) which can aid reflection and assist in progress reviews.

Academic skills modules are increasingly offered online. 'Learning to learning online' is being seen as the new graduate employability skill and is considered to be different to having IT competence.

Data analysis of information derived from institutional technologies (i.e. VLEs) assists institutions in learning more about their students. Online student interactions are being analysed in order to gauge levels of engagement, inform academic practice and to predict issues of student retention.

Online pastoral care - a number of institutions are experimenting with offering this anonymously online using technologies such as 'Second Life'.

During this time emphasis is on face-to-face activities for social integration.

subject specific as the year progresses

Evaluating

the role of technology in supporting students

The shift from quality assurance to quality enhancement has become a growing focus for most HEIs and is often linked to learning and teaching strategies or to the broader strategic management of the student experience (QAA, HEA and HEFCE, 2008). Technology is increasingly viewed as essential for the support of learning and as a possible means of enhancement, although it is reported that the balance between 'orthodox' teaching methods and e-learning is seen as something which needs to be kept under review (QAA, 2008b).

Over the last decade there has been a notable shift in the field of e-learning in the way decisions are taken with regard to investing in technology and employing learning technologists to support the student experience. The adoption of a more evidence-based approach to embedding e-learning has been highlighted through a number of recent national reports such as Browne et al, 2008; JISC, 2008; JISC, ALT and HEA, 2008; JISC and HEA, 2008 which:

- explore the tangible benefits of e-learning
- document student skills and expectations
- benchmark e-learning activities across the educational sector.

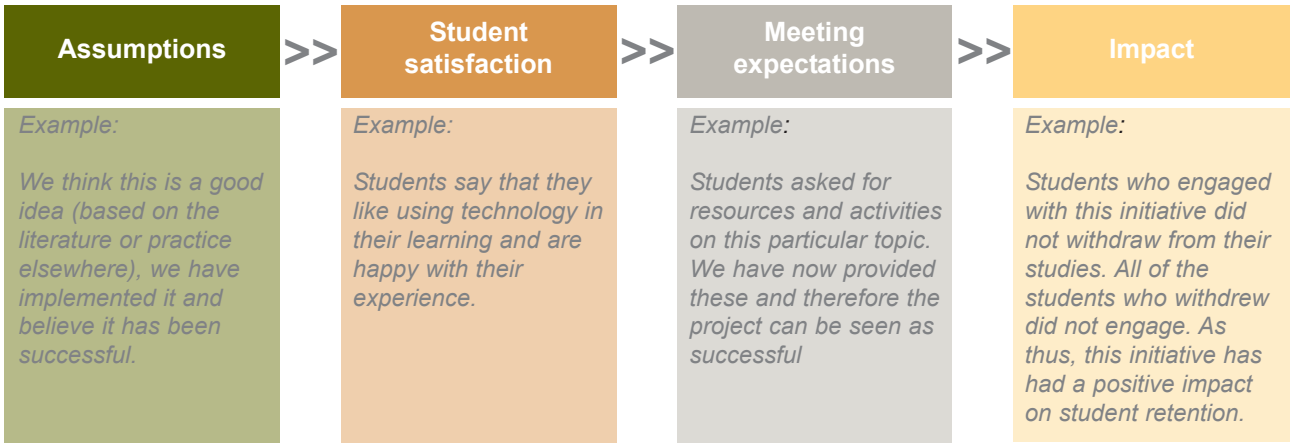
Ultimately, the purpose of these activities and reports is to assist institutions to take informed decisions when investing in activities which can enhance learning and teaching and ultimately the student experience.

The way in which institutions make decisions about investing in e-learning projects has been a key concern of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). The Committee funded research which specifically considered the approaches institutions take when deciding which projects to fund, and how they evaluate their value and any return on investment. The Benefits of Investment in ICT Landscape Study (BIILS), which ran from 2008-10, explored how the financial and non-financial benefits of investments in this area are evaluated within higher and further education in the UK. It found that a spectrum of techniques and measures of success were used to evaluate investments, depending whether the project was related to infrastructure, corporate systems or learning technologies. This is not surprising, as each of these areas has a unique set of anticipated and delivered benefits associated with it. In the BIILS, Breslin and Cullen (2008) found that very few methodologies and procedures were available for measuring ICT investments within educational contexts. By far the most popular method of evaluating learning technologies initiatives was the 'informal review'. This type of review consists of comparing the perceptions of outcomes with the anticipated benefits/expectations within a committee structure. The comparison is often dependent on anecdotal evidence, reports and the professional judgement of committee members.

In the last decade there has been a notable shift in the types of data and reports that are requested by committees from practitioners who engage with learning technologies initiatives and technology-dependent interventions that are put in place to support students. However, often the measures of success have not been identified or stated. Thus, attempting to declare an initiative as 'successful' often results in having to negotiate moving goal posts.

Initial decisions on investing in learning technologies initiatives were made on assumptions that technological interventions may benefit learners and the way in which they approach their

studies. These were often derived from imprecise yet reliable standards such as experience of similar initiatives having worked well in the past, possibly in similar settings or with similar students. More recently, practitioners are being asked to evaluate their initiatives in terms of impact and the extent to which they contribute to achieving institutional goals.



Evaluation methods have moved on to consider a number of factors which are detailed in the examples of the case studies included in this guide. Briefly, these include:

- **Gauging levels of engagement**

Both Paterson (2010) and Alsford (2010) used access and uptake data to establish whether their initiatives were successful. The number of hits on a web offering and the number of students who chose to attend follow-up workshops were indicative of the perceived usefulness and student desire to engage with the support that was offered. Access statistics were also used by Cole (2010a; 2010b) and Haines (2010) who felt that their initiatives were successful as they were able to engage more students online than within a face-to-face workshop. In addition, in the study by Haines (2010), a notable increase in lecture attendance demonstrated increased levels of engagement.

Quite often when introducing technological interventions, attempts are made to compare levels of engagement with the behaviours of previous student cohorts at a time before the intervention was introduced. As such, Russell and Bullen (2010) measured the difference in participation and engagement and report the marked increase in these areas as a measure of success.

- **Reporting perceptions**

Much qualitative data which is collected in a multitude of ways (student diaries, blogs, video logs, interviews, focus groups, etc) is also considered when evaluating initiatives. These methods attempt to document the lived experience of an intervention and to provide rich and telling descriptions of what has been achieved and what further improvements need to be considered. Mann, Usher and Devlin (2010a), Garvey (2010) and Alsford (2010) all considered student perceptions of the usefulness and value of a resource/initiative in their evaluations; Brander (2010) and Fitzgibbon and Prior (2010) also looked into staff perceptions. Fitzgibbon and Prior (2010) highlighted the bridging of the gap between staff and student perceptions as a key measure of success.

- **Considering student satisfaction**

A number of studies, such as Schertzer and Schertzer (2004), have considered and identified student satisfaction as a factor in retaining students in higher education. Furthermore, in light of the importance of the National Student Survey which aims to measure students' satisfaction with their courses, institutions are increasingly investigating the perceived importance of projects they are undertaking. Understanding what students value and what they perceive as useful to their studies appears to be an important determinant in deciding which initiatives are considered to be successful as well as which initiatives are to be taken forward. Thus, amongst their other measures of success, Alsford (2010) and Russell and Bullen (2010) consider student satisfaction as a key indicator in their evaluations.

- **Meeting student needs**

Following on from trying to keep students satisfied, institutions have always been keen to meet student expectations and be responsive to their needs. A number of our case studies, including Cole (2010a), take the 'you said, we did' approach to implementing learning technologies to support incoming students who may not have the appropriate levels of skills to study in higher education. Often, just ticking off a list of things an institution now provides to students because they had been requested, or did not previously exist (and the institution was seen as lacking in this area), is sufficient to be considered as a means of establishing whether or not an initiative has been successful.

- **Improving pedagogical and institutional performance indicators**

A number of our case studies investigated the impact of the institution's initiative through the analysis of module grades. This is not uncommon. However, as stated in literature (Martin et al, 2003; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 1998), students' approaches to learning and their performance is dependent on a number of factors (including the learning environment, how they perceive the workload, etc). Therefore it is difficult to attribute improved grades to a single learning technologies intervention. Often the use of technology functions as a catalyst for

rethinking all the aspects of one's current teaching practice. Thus the introduction of a learning technologies solution may have a number of benefits - expected and unexpected - as well as disbenefits, and therefore grades alone may not be informative enough. However, Russell and Bullen (2010) in their case study take the analysis of grades one step further and consider them alongside other indicators which are meaningful to them as educators. For them, the organic emergence of peer support amongst the cohort provides evidence of an enhanced student learning experience and is therefore reported as a successful outcome in their evaluation. Similarly, Haines (2010) reports improved progression as the number of students failing to submit their first assessment fell as a result of the initiative.

We found that key institutional performance indicators are also considered by practitioners in their evaluations. Some of our contributing authors report improved retention rates as a measure of success. Demonstrating improved retention rates of a particular cohort whilst considering the level of engagement of the students who withdrew from their courses is another way in which success can be claimed. For example, Hamshire and Cullen (2010) found that students who had withdrawn had not fully engaged with the improved induction resources.

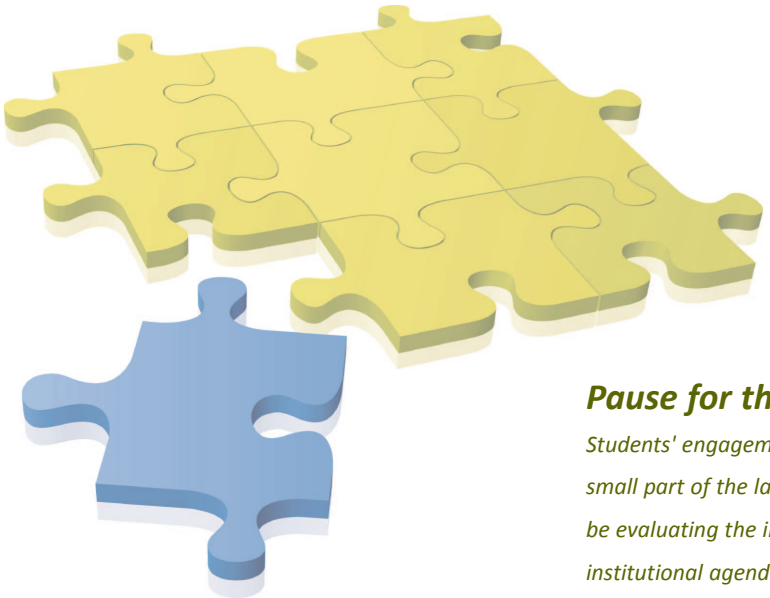
- **Receiving recognition**

Two of our case studies refer to the external acknowledgement of an initiative being of value to students as a measure of success. Positive comments from an external examiner in Innes (2010) and from a professional body during an audit in Garvey (2010) contribute to the authors' increased confidence that their initiatives are worthwhile, especially with regard to the effort and time which was expended in implementing them. In Currant's (2010) case study we see that the adaptation and implementation of the initiative into other contexts and institutions forms part of the success which is being reported.

Acknowledgement can also come from within an institution. For example, it was decided by a number of committees that the 'Student Experience Questionnaire' introduced by Fitzgibbon and Prior (2010) should be repeated annually. Similarly, the 'Introduction to IT' module which was introduced specifically to improve the IT skills of new nurses and midwifery students, as reported by Innes (2010), is being considered for adoption at an institutional level and offered to all incoming students.

Many of our case study contributors undertook a mixed-methods approach to evaluating their initiatives. Mixed methods consider both quantitative and qualitative data, and often more than one of the measures of success outlined above is considered in the evaluation of an initiative which takes this approach.

However, students' engagement with learning technologies forms only a small part of the larger student experience. As such, attempting to evaluate projects which contribute to a much larger agenda, such as improving student retention institutionally, is inherently difficult. At this point, it is important to consider the counterargument that maybe we should not be attempting to measure the impact of these types of initiatives at all. Furthermore, all those who seek learning technologies solutions in the hope of enhancing the student learning experience always appear to have as one of their goals the embedding of their interventions into existing practice. Thus they have 'embeddedness' as a key measure of success. However, embeddedness is inherently difficult to evaluate, as an entity is only embedded if it becomes part of another entity. Thus, the contributions of individuals and the impact of specific projects within larger institutional agendas cannot be picked out, evaluated separately, recognised and rewarded easily by others. We must therefore consider carefully how we evaluate learning technologies initiatives and what claims we can make about their impact, especially during the first year when so much attention and effort is focused by most departments and services within an institution.



Pause for thought:

Students' engagement with learning technologies forms only a small part of the larger student experience. Should we really be evaluating the impact of learning technologies on institutional agendas?

Recommendations, ideas & lessons learnt

The implementation of any new initiatives or procedures inherently implies undergoing a learning journey for those involved in their implementation. In order to learn from some of the processes undertaken by those carrying out the initiatives highlighted within this guide, lessons that have been learnt have been identified and recommendations are offered.

Students as co-creators and co-facilitators

Students appear to be at the heart of any developments, whether these originate from curriculum redesign or from the introduction of improved support structures. Students are present in abundance in further and higher education and are acknowledged as a most valuable source of knowledge and contributors to this guide and therefore it is recommended that the students' expertise to be harnessed when designing and implementing initiatives to support the first-year experience. Hamshire and Cullen (2010), Mann et al (2010a; 2010b) and Cole (2010a) believe that students are essential to the creation and success of their initiatives . Russell and Bullen (2010) also acknowledge the value of using students as co-facilitators and with hindsight feel they should also have involved second-year students in the process of developing their initiative.

Some of the lessons that have been learnt, with regard to involving students as co-creators and co-facilitators, include:

- The importance of involving students in the design of initiatives. After all, they are closer to the student experience and therefore can provide a unique insight into the nature of what is required.
- The recognition that having students act as co-facilitators of initiatives provides benefits at a number of levels:
    - it is beneficial to the staff in that it allows the building of appropriate learning relationships with their students
    - it is beneficial to the individual students who are taking part, as they gain new skills and experience
    - it is beneficial to their peers, as additional support is made available and there is a joint sense of responsibility in the learning experience.
- The importance of ensuring that all those involved in the rolling out of an initiative are fully briefed and trained. Briefing both students and staff who are taking part enables both parties effectively to act as mentors and assist with the roll-out of the scheme. The training of students to help deliver the initiative is seen as essential to the success of the initiative (Mann et al 2010a). In the case study described by Mann et al (2010b), central training was decided upon to ensure parity of access across the university.

University ‘buy-in’

Another clear contributor to the success or failure of an initiative is the extent of 'buy-in' within the institution. Currant (2010) in her case study cites this as being essential. Those initiating a scheme often have to undertake a selling exercise when putting forward their business case, particularly if extra resources are required (Garvey 2010). Haines (2010) suggests that a possible way forward is to investigate and use the technologies to which the institution already subscribes and to engage in cross-institutional expertise in planning and implementation. Alsford (2010) concurs that innovative ways can be identified to support students by using existing technologies and therefore costs, at least with regard to technologies, can be kept to a minimum.

Buy-in is required at a number of levels within an institution, especially from the academics and support staff delivering the initiatives and encouraging students to engage with them. Coles' case studies (2010a; 2010b) show that students are more likely to use resources if the academics who teach them endorse them. However, in order to get staff on board, it is important to provide a context for the issues that are being addressed in order to facilitate an understanding of why an initiative is being implemented and of the possible impact it may have.

It is also important to make explicit the sound pedagogic principles which underpin such initiatives (Russell and Bullen, 2010). By providing context and taking an evidence-based approach to selling an initiative, it will be possible to foster understanding of the benefits of such initiatives as well as a greater understanding of students and what they choose to access online (Cole 2010b). Currant (2010) suggests that getting staff on board with an initiative will not only foster ownership but will also minimise the workload for everyone, because of the team approach which is adopted. It is essential to consider a priori the types of resources required in an initiative and to ensure that these are in place when encouraging staff to engage. By having appropriate resources, technical or otherwise, staff will feel more supported when engaging in such activities (Brander, 2010).

Contributors to this guide suggest that when introducing a new initiative you should:

- Have people with technical expertise around to offer support at crucial times (Brander, 2010; Currant, 2010)
- Invest in resources rather than adopt a service approach (Haines, 2010). Consider the time/resource implications for setting up initiatives for the large cohort groups. Investing time at the beginning is necessary, but once a model is established it should involve less time
- Use existing tools which are supported institutionally. Both staff and students will be

familiar with tools and support mechanisms that are already in place (Russell and Bullen, 2010)

- Allow ample time for the design and implementation phases, especially if adopting a collaborative initiative (Cole, 2010a). Similarly, consider how teaching time may be affected. Brander's (2010) case study demonstrates how, when adopting a Personal Response System in class, extra time was required for the student discussion which was generated by the technical intervention
- Plan early in order to obtain academic buy-in. You will need to ensure high visibility (Currant, 2010) and appropriate advertising in order to make students aware of the initiative (Alsford 2010; Cole 2010b)
- Be considerate with regard to the timing of your initiative. Fitzgibbon and Prior (2010) wished to evaluate the student experience and questioned students at the end of the academic year. However, this is a time when students may suffer from 'survey fatigue' and are likely to be stressed due to upcoming exams, etc.
- Be prepared for peaks and troughs in the usage of your online materials (Currant, 2010). Students often engage with resources as and when they need them. For example, high-access times may be seen to be linked to assessment periods, etc.

Some of the many benefits of using learning technologies to support students include:

- Aiding the formation of networks and friendships between peers (Hamshire and Cullen, 2010)
- Forging effective learning relationships between staff and students prior to arrival (Garvey, 2010; Hamshire and Cullen, 2010)
- Tracking data from online resources can be used to identify non-users or low users in order to proactively offer them additional support (Hamshire and Cullen, 2010).

Using appropriate technologies

Many of the case studies in this guide make the point that we should not be using technology just for the sake of it, but that we should aim to introduce different technologies strategically and appropriately in response to identified needs. Both Haines and Currant suggest being creative with the tools that institutions currently use in house and further suggest clear thinking behind the types of media that are employed and for what causes. Depending on the issues being addressed, the appropriateness of learning technologies needs to be considered not in isolation, but taking into account any other offerings from across the institution (such as face-to-face workshops, induction processes, etc). Often a balanced blended approach is suggested (Innes 2010; Alsford 2010). Technologies must be fit for purpose and need to be used to facilitate processes which otherwise could not be carried out easily. For example, the QuestionMark Perception system allowed for large volumes of students to be contacted and to respond anonymously, which was particularly important for the questionnaire employed by Fitzgibbon and Prior (2010). It also allowed for ease, speed of analysis and gave the ability to drill down on to departmental, programme level in order to create specific data sets for different audiences.

Considerations of appropriateness also extend to student use. Currant (2010) believes that we need to trust students to use technologies appropriately, especially if they are being asked to interact with externally hosted technologies such as Facebook or Twitter. Branding pages appropriately assists the formation of university associations by the students and will help to set the tone so that the students use them appropriately in their studies.

Embedding initiatives into curriculum design

Some of the initiatives described in the case studies have embedded their initiatives within the programme design whilst others are running either prior to or parallel with the academic programme. Paterson (2010) suggests that students are less likely to engage with additional, non-compulsory initiatives. However, in order to get away from a deficit model of support, she proposes that they be embedded within their programme with discipline-specific materials (also Cole 2010a; Innes 2010). Haines (2010) further endorses the embedding of materials but is wary of pan-institutional 'one size fits all' approaches and implores the recognition of discipline-specific needs.

In employing learning technologies to aid student transition, retention and progression, important lessons have been learnt. Considerations of the time and resources required, the necessity of early planning and coordination, using current students as a knowledge resource, employing learning technologies appropriately and taking calculated risks are all deemed as necessary in supporting students innovatively.

Further support for practitioners can be given through:

- Supplying additional examples of initiatives employed; collating advice and guidance in a particular area in order to advise others as they consider potential approaches
- Providing guidance on rigorous evaluation methods for such initiatives
- Granting access to expertise and critical friends within the field to provide guidance in the design and evaluation of initiatives
- Organising networking events to encourage institutional collaboration.

Case study 01

Freshers' refreshers: encouraging students to reflect on transition

Dr. Sally Alsford, University of Greenwich

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ✓ School based
- ❑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ✓ Transition
- ✓ Retention
- ❑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Interactive online quiz

Key contact:
s.e.alsford@gre.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

Freshers' Refreshers week was piloted on our Greenwich campus in October 2009 with the aim of continuing transition support for new students through a mid-term week of activities.

The objectives were:

- to reinforce, reiterate and add to important induction messages and information
- to encourage students to reflect on their transitional progress and to identify issues they might need to deal with
- to raise students' awareness of key support services and resources
- to gather information about students' progress
- to provide students (including, but not only, late arrivals) with a chance to review and catch up face to face and online.

The project grew out of the work of Educational Development and Student Affairs and out of a campus induction group. It reflects a growing emphasis in the university on ongoing support for transition rather than a one-off induction approach. The week was timed to coincide with the review week already in operation in one school.

Student volunteers used an induction checklist to ask new students around campus about their experiences and progress. The questions covered a range of issues including library tours and opening hours, programmes of study, registering with a GP, finance and study skills help (checklist attached). Students' 'top tips for starting out at university' were also collected from both new and continuing students, and a programme of support services workshops and other events for the week was advertised to new students.

Full answers to the checklist questions, with further information and links, were provided online in a 'Rough guide to the first year'. This also included a student glossary of terms (an unexpected outcome of the project).

The set of checklist questions and answers was developed by the university web team into an interactive 'Freshers' quiz'.

Scale and resources

This was a pilot, cross-school/office, campus-based project jointly planned and run by Student Affairs, academic staff from the three schools on campus, library staff, the Students' Union, Educational Development and a team of student volunteers. Staff and student time was volunteered and the project was resourced (advertising and student volunteers' T-shirts) via Student Affairs from an enhanced induction project fund.

Evaluation

The number of students 'checklisted' was counted (291) and their responses provided a snapshot of students' progress in key areas (e.g. how many had met their tutor, applied for their loan, logged into the portal). Web stats and numbers at workshops were used as further quantifiable evidence. Between October and January, 940 students viewed the Freshers' Refreshers page (containing the week's programme and full checklists and answers). 155 students - 44% of visitors to the new arrivals website - went on to take the quiz. Attendance at workshops was very low.

These numbers were a significant measure of success overall and make this exercise well worth repeating, albeit with some modifications. Feedback from student volunteers was a more qualitative indicator of success, reporting enthusiastic responses from new students. The volunteers' presence and activity was one of the most successful elements of the project. Despite low attendance at workshops, the students who were interviewed were aware of the programme. Some conscientisation about support services may have been achieved, but this would be hard to measure.

Lessons learnt

- Checklist engagement - face to face and online - worked well.
- The workshops didn't work very well overall, though there were some limited successes. Earlier organisation and more advertising will be needed, as well as academic buy-in, if students are to be encouraged to take up the workshops.
- Web stats were encouraging - the online refresher quiz could be placed on the portal in future in order to give it a higher profile.

Good practice and transferability

- Definitely transferable to other campuses/institutions.
- Maximum possible cross-institutional support and participation in planning and implementation will increase impact and success.
- Tutorial support and embedding in the curriculum (in a catch-up or review week perhaps) could also greatly enhance success.

Case study 02

Encouraging large group participation through the use of personal response systems

Stephanie Brander, Robert Gordon University

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ☑ School based
- ❑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ❑ Transition
- ❑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Personal response system

Key contact:
s.e.s.brander1@rgu.ac.uk

The role of voting systems within classrooms has facilitated greater interactivity and engagement and captures student responses with ease, with the option to record responses for later analysis. This enhances the formative feedback and enables the learning process by utilising a modern and innovative approach to the facilitation of education. The Personal Response System (PRS) is operated by radio frequency. It allows students attending large group lectures - such as those frequently experienced by first-year students - to actively participate in lectures by responding to multiple choice questions. The results are then presented to the class collectively.

Scale and resources

The Faculty of Health and Social Care purchased the system in 2008 following a successful CAPITAL bid by the Innovative Learning team within the School of Nursing and Midwifery.

E-learning staff from the School of Nursing and Midwifery support academic staff using the system and gathering data. Staff development sessions on the use of the PRS are currently facilitated by the School's e-learning staff.

Evaluation

An evaluative questionnaire showed that 100% of faculty staff who had used the system agreed with the statement Using the PRS enhanced my educational delivery.

A separate questionnaire completed by students who had used the PRS showed that 91% thought that the interactive vote had enhanced their understanding of the topic being taught.

- Further staff feedback can be viewed at: http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/nursing/files/PRS/Staff_feedback.pdf
- Further student feedback can be viewed at: http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/nursing/files/PRS/Student_feedback.pdf

Lessons learnt

We have learnt that the radio frequency PRS is very reliable compared with the infra-red version. Due to the effectiveness of the system in generating group discussion and prompting questions from the class, extra time should be scheduled to allow this to take place. Also, if PRS is used to check understanding, lecturers should be prepared to spend time providing revision/remediation if a lack of understanding is evident in the response.

Good practice and transferability

Making use of the system could be facilitated by any institution. Good practice is to ensure that e-learning/technical support is available to academic staff, through training or staff development sessions and/or providing assistance while the system is in use.

Addressing issues of plagiarism in the first year

Katy Mann, Julie Usher and Zoe Devlin, University of York

Scale of initiative:
- ☑ Institution-wide
- ☐ Campus-wide
- ☐ School based
- ☐ Department based
- ☐ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ☐ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Institutional VLE, TurnItIn

Key contact:
cfmb500@york.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

To provide flexible blended training for students on academic writing skills and on issues surrounding plagiarism and academic misconduct. The initiative combines face-to-face workshops and online resources for independent study, including access to the text matching software TurnItIn, as well as a range of contextual resources. The training is available to all students independently of their taught courses, to use on a formative basis to develop their academic writing and raise awareness of academic misconduct.

The initiative enhances the first-year experience by helping clarify what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, and helping students to understand what is expected of them in terms of academic writing.

Scale and resources

The initiative is currently in pilot stage. The pilot commenced in February 2009 and will end in February 2011. Almost 1,000 students have been trained to date, and the aim is to increase to 4,000 students by February 2011 (to include all new entrants to the university from all 26 departments).

The initiative was funded by internal project funding and cost approximately £7,000. Costs include paying student skill facilitators to co-teach workshops, the development of the online resources in the institutional VLE and the TurnItIn license fee.

Evaluation

The pilot is currently being evaluated by tracking student performance through a formative quiz which tests their understanding of the issues, as well as from their responses to a survey embedded in the VLE module. Interviews and focus groups will be conducted with students and staff in the next few months. In addition, the originality reports are being catalogued, tagged and evaluated for improvements, using both text analysis software and marking by independent examiners.

Lessons learnt

In order to make the initiative scalable across the institution and to minimise costs, departments will need to take responsibility for providing the training for their students and embed the workshops within their timetables. We have also learnt that having student facilitators co-teach in the workshops is very effective, particularly for large groups of students. Consequently we are training staff and students from each department to be able to roll out the training themselves. In addition, we are currently developing a fully online version of the training for distance-learning students.

Good practice and transferability

Top tips would include involving students as skill facilitators and piloting the training from a central point to ensure parity of access across academic departments.

We feel this initiative could be replicated at other institutions; in fact, we are currently working with a small number of institutions who have expressed an interest in adapting the materials for their own use.

Case study 04

Fostering better quality induction experiences through social networking

James P. Gavey, Manchester Metropolitan University

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ✓ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ✓ Transition
- ❑ Retention
- ❑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Ning social networking site

Key contact:
j.garvey@mmu.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

In January 2009 I wished to create an online tool that would facilitate better communication between the students who had accepted a place at our university and the academics working within our department. We decided to utilise the Ning platform for social and educational networking and called the first project nursingbuddies0309. This was a specific network for the nursing students who would join us in March 2009. The specific aims were to enable them to meet each other online and to give them the opportunity to ask questions, to receive information and generally make Freshers' Week a more rewarding and relaxing experience.

Scale and resources

The project was initially set up as a pilot for students of the March 2009 cohort but now runs across all nursing cohorts - September 2009, March 2010, September 2010. We have also captured data from cohorts prior to March 2009 and have incorporated cohorts from March 2008 and September 2008. We have created a site for those from March 2007 who have finished their three-year course but who are still in contact with us. This group is now considered to be an electronic alumni group which feeds back information to us in relation to their job prospects and the nursing positions that they hold. Initially no funding was required and all work was undertaken in my own time to set up the process.

Evaluation

The impact was measured by questionnaire evaluations six-monthly and twelve-monthly and now on an ongoing basis every six months.

It has been extremely successful and received an award of 'Outstanding' from our professional body, the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) on a recent audit. All students are in agreement that the resource has helped them in the transition into HE and we feel that there is a synergy between nursingbuddies and good retention figures since the project started.

Lessons learnt

The project has been extremely successful - so much so that with hindsight we wish we had started it earlier. It is extremely applicable across all departments and subject areas so it is a very versatile project that ensures student satisfaction. At this point we have yet to encounter any aspect of the project that hasn't worked well.

Good practice and transferability

The initiative is highly transferable and extremely easy to implement in any area. However, as of July 2010, Ning are starting to charge for what was previously a free service. As a result of the success of this project, our department is willing to pay the annual fee for the site to continue. Instead of having separate sites for individual cohorts we are now in the process of merging all the sites into one major site.

Increasing student confidence in using IT for learning

Gavin Innes, Robert Gordon University

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ☑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ❑ Retention
- ❑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Not specified

Key contact:
g.innes@rgu.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

The access module Introduction to Information Technology was specifically developed to improve the IT skills of new nursing and midwifery students. Offered as an optional evening class over the summer months, the module aims to teach basic computer skills and increase the students' confidence in using technology. The idea was prompted by the launch of the Scottish Government's e-Health Strategy (2008) which outlines the technology that the NHS will be using in years to come and the staff development that must occur within the NHS to prepare for this.

Scale and resources

This module ran for the first time last year and will be offered to each new intake of undergraduate students. The initiative was resourced by the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Robert Gordon University (RGU). University IT labs were utilised and school e-learning staff facilitated the sessions and all teaching materials were developed in house. Finally, The Study Skills and Access Unit at RGU may provide a similar module for the rest of the university in the future.

Evaluation

A module evaluation was done after the first run and good feedback was received from students. This took the form of an online questionnaire sent out to the participating students. The responses showed that 100% of the students evaluated the module as 'Good' or 'Very good'. The qualitative feedback was also very positive and gave inspiration for further development of the module.

The pass rate of the module was 100% and the external examiner also provided very positive feedback.

Lessons learnt

The marketing of the module to new students has been crucial to the success of this project. In the first year a letter was sent out to all new students with their acceptance letters. This method proved to be effective and efficient. The second run will provide the students with a series of tutorials and 'how to' guides which will be available on a USB memory stick for use during their university career.

Good practice and transferability

This initiative could definitely be duplicated by any university. I suggest that good practice would be to provide the teaching materials online so, by the very fact that the student is working within the content, the student is gaining experience.

Make the activities relevant to the course that the student is about to embark on. For example, the word processing lesson covers how to set out an essay, how to insert page numbers, etc.

We start with one class per week, but as the module progresses we move to one per fortnight with online activities to be done in between. This encourages online interaction and builds the students' confidence.

Case study 06

Maximising the learning potential: Using principles of good practice to guide curriculum change

Mark Russell and Peter Bullen, University of Hertfordshire

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ❑ Department based
- ☑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ☑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Managed learning environment

Virtual classroom technology

Bespoke customisations

Key contact:
m.b.russell@herts.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

Our activity was instigated to respond to a high failure rate in a core first-year engineering module - Fluid Mechanics and Thermodynamics.

The development was linked to good pedagogy, spanned a number of years and was technology rich. The development included:

- use of student unique, weekly assessment tasks. The assessment tasks were created, collected and marked and feedback was collected and delivered to students, using bespoke technology.
- structured use of the Managed Learning Environment (MLE). This included providing good navigation to module notes, web links to additional (motivation) resources, recorded audio-visual presentations and use of the discussion forum to stimulate peer-to-peer support.
- use of virtual classroom technology. This technology was used to provide additional (and recorded) out-of-class, synchronous tutorials.

Significant pedagogic features of the development included:

- student-centred design
- just-in-time teaching
- engaging students with the curriculum
- setting high expectations
- using assessment activity to leverage good study patterns
- establishing good student time on task
- feedback to support both learning and teaching.

Scale and resources

This work was sequential and undertaken over a number of consecutive years. The development was applied to a first-year module. The number of students typically enrolled on the module was around 150.

Many of the developments have been implemented out of my own time and out of a genuine desire to respond to the number of students failing the examination. Arguably, students failing modules highlight issues about us as teachers and the prevailing pedagogic design as well as highlighting issues about the students.

Small-scale funding was received from the HEA Engineering Subject Centre and university funding to support the evaluation of the weekly assessment tasks. Many of the principles of the development, in particular the assessment tools, are now being used elsewhere across the university.

Evaluation

The impact of this development was measured from multiple perspectives. Given the primary stimulus for the development (high examination failure rate), examination performance data was analysed. Examination performance improved.

The high student failure rate, however, would have been stimulated by numerous factors and is likely to have arisen from an inappropriate pedagogic design. Hence we explored factors relating to effective pedagogy, including time on task, prompt feedback and establishing high expectations. We also collected the students' perspective of the assessment activity.

We found (and created), inter alia:

- higher student satisfaction ratings
- that we had motivated more independent learning
- higher student engagement on the module discussion forum
- students responding to, and helping, each other
- students engaged in learning-oriented, weekly, low-stakes assessment activity
- feedback that is prompt
- that the assessment tasks helped the students see their conceptions and misconceptions
- that the students' ongoing performance data, from the weekly assessment tasks, was useful to support the teachers' teaching

Arguably, the above affordances arising from the development are aligned with a more effective pedagogic design.

Lessons learnt

This work reinforces the importance of both good content and good pedagogical design. The weekly assessment tasks were particularly successful in responding to our pedagogic design.

In hindsight, it might have been helpful to have enlisted the help of second-year students to help out on the module - perhaps running online sessions or managing the discussion forum. This would have helped to improve the efficiency of the activity and also reaped the additional benefits of peer teaching and peer support.

Good practice and transferability

- Use robust pedagogic guidance to inform decision making. Our work is tied to established principles of good educational practice - for instance, Chickering and Gamson's Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. Using a sound pedagogic framework reminds us that any technology and our subsequent interactions with students need to be carefully designed and created to fulfil specific functions. Without a pedagogic framework we are operating in the dark.

- Be sure of the role of your MLE. We used our MLE to extend and enhance the lecture tutorial activity. Consider a just-in-time approach to teaching. The MLE has the potential to facilitate some great out-of-class engagement.

- Don't forget the significance of assessment on student learning. The impact of assessment to stimulate appropriate activity should not be forgotten. Good assessment has the potential to stimulate good study behaviours and good learning. We deliberately exploited the assessment-activity-learning relationship.

- Use tools that are supported. We used our MLE as a hub for all our module-related activity. This meant that the students already understood the major functionality of the system. Repeatedly drawing students back to the MLE (through the weekly assessment activity and the ensuing lively discussion on the forum) allowed us to keep engaging students with the curricula. Our students were now being 'drip-fed' Fluid Mechanics and Thermodynamics.

Further details

The background to the weekly assessment activity can be found at:
https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/2299/2596/1/902909.pdf

The students' views and impact of the assessment can be found at:
https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/2299/2598/1/902910.pdf

An expanded description of the work can be found at:
http://www.ineer.org/Events/ICEE2007/papers/240.pdf

Case study 07

Developing a spiralling induction programme: a blended approach

Claire Hamshire and W.Rod Cullen, Manchester Metropolitan University

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ☑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ☑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Institutional VLE, videos, Facebook

Key contact:
c.hamshire@mmu.ac.uk
r.cullen@mmu.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

Ongoing evaluation of induction in the Department of Physiotherapy indicated that some of our students failed to engage or take advantage of induction resources that were made available to them.

This project aimed to improve active participation in induction activities by implementing a phased induction programme to our undergraduate Physiotherapy provision. We developed a new blended, integrated induction programme based on feedback from a focus group of student representatives from the 2007-08 cohort.

The purpose of the project was to extend induction across the first term from pre-entry until the Christmas break. This would avoid information overload in the first week while still providing students with flexible access to a broad range of information relating to academic skills, programme administration, campus orientation and social aspects. Pre-entry induction resources were provided within a Managed Learning Environment (MLE) course area delivered via WebCT VISTA, so students had online access to:

- the programme resources
- talking head video clips of staff and students
- a discussion board for questions
- web links to key university support services
- web links to Manchester travel and entertainment sites.

The aims of this project were threefold:

- To ensure active participation and engagement with induction activities of our Level 1 2008 intake for BSc (hons) Physiotherapy.
- To evaluate student uptake, utilisation and impact of new online integrated induction materials.
- To determine how we can best engage students with induction resources to improve retention and progression.

The objectives were:

- To develop a blended learning induction programme incorporating a suite of integrated induction materials for BSc(Hons) Physiotherapy.

l To determine the students' perceptions and experiences of induction as a whole and to identify barriers and facilitators to using integrated induction materials.

- To explore the relationship between student usage of the integrated induction materials and student retention/progression by comparing high, low and non-users.

Scale and resources

This departmental-level project emerged from ongoing action research into student induction and transition dating back to the 2007 academic session. HEA mini-project funding (5k) was obtained for the 2008-09 academic session under the heading of the 'easystart induction project'. The project team was cross-institutional and included:

- Claire Hamshire - Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, Dept of Physiotherapy
- Dr W. Rod Cullen - Principal Lecturer in Learning and Teaching Technologies, Centre for Learning and Teaching

- Rosie Jones - Library
- Dr Mark Langan, Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, Dept of Environmental and Geographical Sciences
- Emma - Student partner, Dept of Physiotherapy

As project leader, Claire Hamshire was released from teaching for a period of time. The student partner was employed using money allocated from the HEA funding. Mark Langan was paid as an advisor on data analysis from the project funding. Rod Cullen and Rosie Jones contributed as part of their normal duties in central university services for academic support. Some funding was used for travelling to and subsistence at conference as part of the dissemination strategy for the project.

Evaluation

We conducted a sequential exploratory, mixed-methods evaluation (Creswell, 2003) using both intra- and inter-method mixing. The intra-method mixing was achieved by the concurrent use of open and closed items on a single questionnaire (Johnson and Turner, 2003). The inter-method mixing was achieved by sequentially mixing two methods (Johnson and Turner, 2003) - semi-structured one-to-one interviews followed by a questionnaire. Thus we adhered to the fundamental principle of mixed methods research, mixing methods in a manner that offered complementary strengths and no overlapping weaknesses (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

In brief, this involved conducting one-to-one narrative interviews with a targeted selection (high and non-users of online resources) of the 2008-09 cohort of students.

The narrative interviews were analysed thematically. The themes that were identified were used to develop a questionnaire that was delivered to the whole cohort, using a classroom response system to explore the students' levels of agreement with the findings of the narrative interviews.

Students were broadly positive about the induction programme as a whole. In relation to the main uses of technology on the programme, our students valued:

- the opportunity to have access to the online resources in advance of formally starting at university. It was, however, evident that not all students had accessed these in advance. Some students reported technical problems and other were unsure of the purpose of the online resources.
- the short videos (talking heads) of key staff introducing themselves and their roles.
- the opportunity to meet other students online before starting their course. A discussion forum was set up in WebCT which students were able to access up to three weeks before the start of the course. We were initially disappointed that this was not used extensively (it was used mainly to pose formal questions to staff relating to the operation of the course). However, through the narrative interviews we were able to discover that students had been using the social networking site Facebook to communicate with each other and find out about the course as much as six months before the start of the course. A significant proportion (over 55%) had been engaged in and valued this online socialisation in advance of starting their course.

In previous evaluations, students had reported feelings of information overload during induction. We attempted to address this by cutting back on the information that was sent out to students in the induction pack and making some of the additional material available online. We feel that progress has been made in this respect, as less than

20% of the cohort found it daunting to receive everything (the information pack) at once and over 60% of the cohort agreed with the statement 'The induction pack was brilliant because everything was in it'.

At the time of conducting the interview and the questionnaire, the students were not in a position to comment on their use of online skills resources that were incorporated into the online resources.

Retention was increased for this year group and it was found that the students who did leave were those who failed to engage fully with the spiralled induction resources, although we feel it would be wrong to claim that this was entirely due to the project. There is no simple formula to increase retention across a diverse student population where attrition is a multi-causal problem that requires a combination of solutions. However by identifying barriers to retention and best institutional practice, this project made recommendations for realistic steps that can be taken to reduce attrition and tip the balance towards student success.

Lessons learnt

Due to technical issues and the need for the students to use a password to access the MLE course area, we have now created a group on the Facebook site instead. This site has been run by two second-year students who answer questions and provide information. The site includes videos of the students and a virtual tour of the campus.

Good practice and transferability

The recommendations of this project go beyond a simple assessment of the provision of online resources and the use of technology to facilitate socialisation. We make the following recommendations for the design of induction programmes.

- Induction should be thought of as an ongoing process, not as a single event or a series of events. The process should begin at the point that the students first contact the institution, department or programme team and continue up until the end of the first year of study.
- Induction should seek to establish friendly, effective working relationships between the students and key staff (academic and admin) on the programme team before the students arrive at the university.
- Induction should facilitate students in establishing relationships (making friends) with their peers before they arrive at the university. This should be encouraged both:
    a. formally (possibly through structured discussion forums in institutional MLEs and
    b. informally (through social networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo).
- Opportunities for making friends and forming peer support networks should be encouraged early and built into an induction programme. Face-to-face tutorial sessions utilising small group work and an informal social event with staff and students provided an environment that encouraged this in this project.
- Student usage patterns of online induction resources should be monitored so that students who are non-users or very low users can be contacted at an early stage and offered support and advice.
- Curriculum development of induction resources should be done in partnership with students so that the provision will meet the needs of a diverse student population more appropriately.

A full report on this project is available at:
http://www.pebbleweb.co.uk/mmu/webfolio.aspx?webfolioid=14266

Encouraging the development and transferability of academic skills

Jessie Paterson, University of Edinburgh

Scale of initiative:
- ☑ Institution-wide
- ☐ Campus-wide
- ☐ School based
- ☐ Department based
- ☐ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ☑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Not specified

Key contact:
jessie.paterson@ed.ac.uk

Academic skills course

The aim of the project was to ensure that all our undergraduate students have the academic skills they require for their studies. The School of Divinity has for a number of years been aware that our student intake is highly variable in terms of skill knowledge; even those who claim to have good skills often find it difficult to transfer these to an academic context. We produced an online course (backed up with a few short lectures) in which all our students were enrolled to ensure that they all have the core skills required for their academic work - use of library, IT, literacy (including plagiarism prevention, etc). The activities include a range of materials that will hopefully encourage the students to explore and become familiar with the skills they require. Substantial use is made of the University's ISIS online course (Information Skills and IT Skills) - see http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/interchange/spring2008/mogey2.htm and other such resources.

We have an open day where local schools come along to receive a taste of what university study is like, including some taster lectures. This is backed up with a web presence giving an introduction to the first-year course 'Religion in the Contemporary World' to give a flavour for the sorts of topics and issues this course covers - see http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/divinity/studying/undergraduates/work-like/religion-contemporary-world.

Scale and resources

The academic skills course is made available to all the undergraduate students in our school. Initially it was called 'IT skills' and students were required to complete it within the first semester of starting university. For the following two years, the course was renamed 'academic skills' and the students were given two years to complete it, although the actual content delivered was the same. This coming year, the course will be compulsory in that students must complete it or they will be unable to continue to honours, and it must be completed within the first year (with the normal university resit opportunities in place). To date, the course has been put together solely within our own time with no additional funding.

Evaluation

Student take-up and feedback has been mixed. Uptake has been generally low although those who have taken the course have commented that it was very useful. In the meantime, academic colleagues frequently comment on student weakness in terms of using the library, literacy, etc. It is hoped that making the course compulsory will mean that everyone will see the benefits.

Lessons learnt

For this to work the course has to be compulsory otherwise students won't engage with it. It must be embedded alongside the students' academic work or they see it as an extra rather than an essential component.

Good practice and transferability

This is transferable - much of the material is generic although subject customisations are required.

Case study 09

Resources for online undergraduate skills development

Marianne Cole, University of Cambridge

Scale of initiative:
- ☑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ❑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ❑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Not specified

Key contact:
mc658@cam.ac.uk

Aims and Objectives

Cambridge Online Study Skills (COSS) was developed in collaboration with the University of Cambridge Language Centre to provide a core set of generic skills development activities for all first-year undergraduates. This initiative was developed in response to student survey data which identified this specific training need.

The aims were:

- To provide students with anonymous access to key generic skills development resources prior to arrival and throughout the first year of their studies
- To support students in making the transition to independent learning

The objectives were:
To produce a suite of online interactive web-based resources to address the following key areas:

- Academic writing
- Effective listening
- Effective reading
- Making the most of supervisions
- Managing your time
- Preparing for exams.

The interactive parts of all the activities encouraged independent learning rather than taking a prescriptive 'problem-solution' format. The content also stressed the significance of discipline-specific issues relating to any strategies adopted by students.

Scale and resources

This is an institution-wide initiative that has now been available for one academic year. It was funded by the HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. Members of staff from the Language Centre worked with the Transkills Team and one software developer to develop these resources.

Evaluation

Evaluation is ongoing and based on site access statistics together with early feedback from students during the development phase. It is therefore too early to report on the impact of the initiative.

Relating COSS directly to improvements in reported transition issues will be difficult. Students may be reluctant to report that they have accessed skills development resources, and breaking down access statistics into disciplines would require more information from the students as they log in. It is likely that students would be self-conscious about accessing skills development resources, therefore there are currently no plans to obtain more detailed data. In addition, COSS is only one component of skills development initiatives being undertaken in the university and it would be difficult to separate out the impact of individual components.

Early indications are that students are more likely to access the resources during vacation periods, which suggest that little time is available during the early induction period and term time. Data on access to specific areas has yet to be evaluated.

Lessons learnt

It is challenging to create meaningful online generic activities, especially in areas such as time management that are dependent on multiple variables.

Pitching the materials appropriately to suit our context took careful thought and was more time-consuming than the team anticipated. Such an initiative required early collaboration between staff with a range of expertise, including software developers who were able to advise on what was technically possible. Work schedules often conflicted, making it a challenge to meet deadlines.

Activities that worked well seemed to be those that were informed by material obtained from 'the field'. For example, a note-taking activity asked students to watch a recording of a lecture and listen out for verbal signposts. This activity was developed in direct response to reports from first-year students who found it difficult to adapt to the lecture format.

Feedback from students indicated that they are more likely to engage with resources that are endorsed by those who teach them. Survey responses from tutors on transition challenges therefore influenced some of the content of these resources.

Good practice and transferability

- Our students seem to value more highly resources that are endorsed or even influenced by those who teach them. It is therefore important to relate generic skills development activities to the institutional and discipline contexts as far as possible.
- Consulting a range of teaching staff and students during the design process will help with subsequent take-up and endorsement.
- Similar initiatives are already in place across a wide range of institutions. COSS should be transferable to other contexts given appropriate resources and expertise.

Case study 10

Searchable portal to support undergraduate academic development

Marianne Cole, University of Cambridge

Scale of initiative:
- ☑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ❑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ❑ Retention
- ❑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Not specified

Key contact:
mc658@cam.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

The Online Undergraduate Skills Directory came about as a result of feedback from undergraduate students which indicated that there was variability in the information and resources made available to them. It also indicated that online resources were often buried within faculty and departmental websites which made them difficult to find.

The aims were:

- To provide undergraduate students with simple, fast and anonymous access to skills development resources
- To improve the consistency of information made available to students, irrespective of college and discipline
- To encourage the provision of additional online resources.

The objectives were:
To provide undergraduate students with a resource directory that is searchable by year of study, discipline and the following categories:

- Disciplinary skills
- Critical reading
- Academic writing
- Referencing
- Avoiding plagiarism
- Presentation skills
- Marking criteria
- Examiners' reports
- Revision and studying
- Past exam papers
- Time management
- Mathematical skills
- Making the most of supervisions (tutorials).

Scale and resources

This is an institution-wide initiative that has now been in place for one academic year. It was funded by the HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, developed within the Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies in collaboration with the University Management Information Services Division and is maintained by the Transkills team. Two members of the Transkills team worked on the content of the directory in consultation with one software developer.

Evaluation

Evaluation is ongoing and resources are still being added. Initial site access data show surges during vacation periods and lower usage at other times, suggesting that students access these resources when they have time to reflect on their learning.

More time needs to be invested in faculty engagement with the directory, and some disciplines remain under-represented.

It will be difficult to relate the introduction of the skills directory directly to positive

feedback from students on their transition experiences due to other parallel initiatives in the university. More detailed site statistics would not only be time-consuming to analyse, but would also reduce the level of anonymity to the user. Anonymity of access is particularly important in our context, where some students are reluctant to reveal uncertainty.

Lessons learnt

All students were informed about the directory at the beginning of their course, but wider promotion across the university would be beneficial. It seems that students are more likely to respond to guidance offered by those who teach them, and therefore wider college and faculty engagement will be essential for the future success of the initiative.

It would be useful to report back to faculties and colleges about which resources are accessed and at what point in the year. This feedback could be used to inform the content of induction programmes, as these often leave students with a sense of information overload at the beginning of their university studies.

Good practice and transferability

This initiative is certainly transferable to other contexts given appropriate resources and technical expertise. However, much of the content will be specific to this institution.

Case study 11

Enhancing learner development through the use of blogs

Sue Forder and Karen Vernon-Parry, Sheffield Hallam University

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ☑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ❑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Institutional VLE

Key contact:
s.d.forder@shu.ac.uk
k.vernon-parry@shu.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

Students have been engaged in writing activities within engineering and mathematics modules. These activities have included the use of individual and group blogs within the VLE BlackboardTM. The aims of the project were to enhance students' learning through writing opportunities, to support their transition into higher education, to develop learner autonomy and to improve retention. The use of the online blogs was a development from paper-based learning diaries, with the intention of encouraging regular reflection, plus feedback from peers and tutors.

Scale and resources

The project focused on 90 foundation-year engineering students in the Department of Engineering and Mathematics and 50 foundation-year students in the Department of Biosciences. The use of a learning diary had been developed in a mathematics module over a four-year period and carried 30% of the module marks; a way was needed to encourage and capture regular entries in the diary.

During the same time period, the number of students on the Foundation Year in Engineering course was growing, and the course team was concerned that a significant proportion of the engineering students were not developing graduate writing skills as they progressed through their course. This had a significant impact on their results in some modules in semester two.

Motivated by a consultation meeting with a specialist in supporting the development of student writing, these two tutors developed this initiative to support student learning. This was done by embedding writing skills that included individual blogs to encourage fluency of writing and reflective blogs, as well as group blogs to discuss the purpose and format of the diary for the biosciences students. For the engineering students, the group blog was to develop research, technical writing and referencing skills by compiling a glossary of engineering terms.

The project was supported through the Centre for Promoting Learner Autonomy in the CETL at SHU, with guidance provided on the research. Analysis of the research was done in staff's own time.

Evaluation

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire in order to assess their disposition and capacity to engage in different types of writing activities. It was completed by 23 biosciences foundation-year students and by 23 foundation-year engineering students.

Analysis of module marks indicates that there is a positive correlation for both groups of students of their engagement with the online blog compared to their performance in other assignments and overall progression.

In addition, student comments in their blogs provide evidence of reflective practice that supports the development of learner autonomy.

Lessons learnt

For the engineering students, blogs were found to be a very effective way of keeping in touch with the part-time students, and some students found their blog to be a useful way to mention difficult personal issues that the course leader needed to know about. The lack of requirement for grammatical English removed a barrier to participation for some students who were able to express their thoughts freely. The group blogs were not so successful.

The majority of biosciences students engaged with the blog regularly. The structured assessment, with marks attached, meant that the blog developed reflective practice and use of the formative feedback given by the tutor through the VLE.

Good practice and transferability

The use of blogs provides an excellent way for students to reflect regularly on their progress and gives them the opportunity to receive tutor feedback. This would work well in other modules, particularly projects and dissertations. It promotes participation by allocating blog activity module marks.

When large numbers of students are involved it takes significant tutor time to read and respond to the blogs on a regular basis.

Case study 12

Using evidence-based practice to shape the student experience

Karen Fitzgibbon and Julie Prior, University of Glamorgan

Scale of initiative:
- ☑ Institution-wide
- ☐ Campus-wide
- ☐ School based
- ☐ Department based
- ☐ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☐ Transition
- ☐ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
QuestionMark Perception

Key contact:
kftizgib@glam.ac.uk
djprior1@glam.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

Following the success of the two learner support tools (presented at the Making Connections Conference in 2008), the authors were asked to use QuestionMark Perception (QMP) to design a questionnaire for all students about all aspects of their university experience apart from their academic experience. It was felt that the university gathers a lot of data about academic experiences through measures such as module evaluation questionnaires, student representation at scheme and programme boards, and student feedback through the student voice representatives, but that we had less information about the wider student experience.

The Student Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) therefore focuses on the wider student experience - for example, students' participation in social activities, friendship groups, use and perception of the campus outside of timetabled classes, accommodation and travel arrangements and the impact of any of these on their studies. Three important 'catch all' questions were also included:

- What has been the best aspect of your experience?
- What has been the worst aspect of your experience?
- If you could make one significant change what would it be?

as used in the Yorke and Longden's (2007) work.

The objective of this questionnaire was therefore to investigate how positive (or negative) students felt about their wider experience - a subject on which the university had anecdotal data but little empirical data.

Scale and resources

The authors designed the questionnaire in consultation with the university's Heads of Learning and Teaching. It was launched at the end of the examination period (late May) and remained open for four weeks (until just before examination results were released to students). The questionnaire was piloted in the 2007-08 academic year, with open access to all on-campus students.

There were 455 participants, which exceeded expectations given the time of year and also given the common perception at the institution that our students are over-surveyed. The data from the first year of release was very rich and provided both quantitative and qualitative output. Indeed, the volume of qualitative comments received was unexpected, as many students took every opportunity available to provide additional comments.

The authors analysed the data and produced a report for the Student Lifecycle Group (chaired by the PVC Student Support) and for the Heads of Learning and Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committees. Findings pertaining to corporate and other services were also disseminated as relevant.

Following the success of the exercise and the impact of reliable data about the wider student experience, all the committees agreed that the SEQ should be repeated annually. (The response rate rose to 529 in 2008-9, and data from 2009-10 is yet to be analysed.)

Evaluation

The analysis of the questionnaire data has impacted on several distinct groups. The Lifecycle Group found the annual reports useful for contributing to a better understanding of the impact of a major project on student expectations in the university. Academic staff who requested data targeted for specific groups found the provision of reliable and large-scale responses invaluable for obtaining a better understanding of the wider student experience. Reports produced for the Students' Union, the Learning Resources Centre and Learner and Corporate Support Services can help to inform and influence future service provision.

It is difficult to measure success in precise terms of the impact of receiving better information about the student experience. However, the university is confident that providing information which closes the gap between staff perceptions and students' complete university experience is one of the first steps to enhancing the student experience. Understanding the way the student experience continues to evolve is also key to ensuring that the university makes the best use of its resources to provide facilities and services that meet the needs of current and future students.

Feedback to students on changes made in response to their comments in the SEQ is provided through the Student Voice Representatives and the university's 'You said, we did' website.

Lessons learnt

When we launched the SEQ in late May we wondered whether the response rate would be very low. We felt that asking students to reflect on their entire university experience to date could only be done late in the academic year, after all final assessments were completed. However, we were also conscious of so-called 'survey fatigue', that students may not access their emails in the post exam period and that students with early or no exams may already have returned home.

The number of responses received and the detailed comments that students took the time to think about and submit took us by surprise! So much so that in the following years (2008-09 and 2009-10) we have continued to conduct the survey at the same time of year.

Some questions have been refined and a small number have been removed, where it was apparent that students were misinterpreting the question or where the data collected was not subsequently used.

On the whole, the survey has been positively received by students, which is evidenced by the good response rates and the nature and volume of student comments received.

Good practice and transferability

This idea is eminently transferable and the authors would be willing to share the survey with other institutions who may be interested in developing a better understanding of their students' experiences.

Using QMP to deliver the survey online enabled students to participate anonymously, which may have contributed to the response rates and the volume of student comments received.

Using an online survey tool also significantly assisted the ease and speed of analysis, particularly in the drilling down of data - for example, by university faculties, by mode or level of study or by student characteristics (such as nationality, age, gender, etc).

Case study 13

Promoting learner engagement through personal development planning

Graham Haines, Anita Norcott, Denise Buckley, Sarah Williams, Andrew Morgans and Helen Blockwell, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Scale of initiative:
- ❑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ☑ School based
- ❑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ❑ Transition
- ☑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
e-portfolio system
Wimba

Key contact:
ghaines@uwic.ac.uk
anorcott@uwic.ac.uk
sjwilliams@uwic.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

All the School of Sport's approximately 480 first-year learners take a ten-credit PDP module. This module continues throughout level 2. The disinvested attitude pervading the former lead-lecture delivery has been transformed into an unprecedented level of learner (and increased staff) involvement and ownership by combining a blended learning approach with the technology of the personal development portfolio EXPO bolt-on to Blackboard. This is supported by the original personal tutor system which matches students to staff with similar interests. The system was set up as a result of a Learning and Teaching Unit funded fellowship in 2005.

Following a three-day outdoor residential and experiential learning experience, learners attend a handful of lectures taking the form of detailed briefings and Q&A sessions. In between these they engage in highly structured mini-cycles of e-lessons, driven, designed and evaluated by a collaborative cross-functional development team comprising the contributors above.

'Snack-sized' e-lessons are all directed towards the module's assessment products. These vary from an online academic skills quiz to reflective and employability development logs. The second half of the year is partly devoted to guiding learners reflectively through their pathway choices in years 2 and 3, looking at how these choices will direct their careers options.

On a weekly basis, learners upload reflective pieces and assessments to their online PDP. The PDP structure mirrors exactly the structure of the module and is reviewed regularly by the learners' personal tutors.

The two key aims are: (1) developing understanding of employability and the personal, social, academic, reflective and professional skills required; and (2) devising an accurate evidence base for evolving employability attributes and skills.

Scale and resources

Two complete first-year cohorts have now completed the first module since 2008, and the first intake has also finished the complementary second-year module. The PDP module is compulsory for every undergraduate learner in the School of Sport - about 480 students per year.

The initiative described in this case study is part of a department-based initiative to solve a deep-seated learning problem. In all honesty, the initiative was evolved rather than tightly planned. Early successes showed us that the carefully controlled input of the skills-based e-lessons (some requiring independent research with inquiry-based elements), combined with the directed writing in the reflective logs, appealed to learners looking for both structure and flexible learning opportunities.

The e-learning material was authored by the two UWIC teams most closely linked to the key aims above - Careers and Academic Skills, with some input from library staff. Significant technical set-up of the EXPO portfolio was devised by the Learning and Teaching Development Unit which also provided some funding for the Module Leader's time. The chief resource required was the staff time of the above; the academic staff who

provided the personal tutoring were already allocated in the previous module structure.

We used technologies already owned by UWIC: the Blackboard VLE and the WIMBA authoring tool. EXPO was purchased for the benefit of all UWIC's schools, not only sport. Though these low-tech tools have limiting frustrations at times, learning and maintaining them generally lies within the capabilities of the module delivery team - a crucial consideration.

Evaluation

During the first cycle (2008-2009), a small focus group interview evaluation was conducted with nine learners in autumn 2008. In the spring of 2009 an open questionnaire was circulated for the option counselling lessons - this drew 12 responses. The prompted feedback was mixed; however, criticism tended towards structural issues (length of lessons and tasks) and praise tended towards content, with half the questionnaire respondents stating that the guided reflection had helped their module choices.

Virtual attendance (take-up of e-learning) has easily outstripped previous physical attendance in both years - e.g. the first option counselling e-lessons in 2009 drew 65% of the cohort whereas lead lectures are likely to have drawn tens at a similar stage. Attendance at the lead lectures has risen to an average of four out of six per student. In 2009-10 the e-lessons for first-year learners were accessed some 27,000 times by the 445 learners in the cohort. Less than 30 missed the first online assessment in 2008 and less than 20 in 2009. The highly structured nature of the PDP log has encouraged learners to fill it in, though not necessarily in the order desired.

Unsolicited and often fulsome comments have been emailed or offered to the module leader (Graham Haines), including several requests from the first cohort to 'keep the e-lessons up there' when they exited the first-year module.

A detailed interpretive thematic analysis of learners' PDP texts (28) and staff interviews (4) relating to the aims of the module over the whole two-year cycle is ongoing. Completion of this qualitative piece of research is some way off, but initial findings show that learners are:

- reflecting meaningfully on the module as a whole
- relating skills learned to future practical applications
- contextualising their learning outside the module's inputs and demands - e.g. recognising skills learning elsewhere
- taking critical ownership of the module products - e.g. the researcher has noted prevalence of 'my' over 'I' in the analysis

Staff similarly commented on significantly improved satisfaction and outcomes.

Lessons learnt

In each pair: ▲ = worked well and ▽ = didn't work and will be changed.

▲ Changing a module delivery method and its technological mediation can put a high-value stamp on unpopular PDP for a large cohort of learners. The module is now the heart of the school's first-year learning experience.

▽ Input tasks must be achievable in a single short session. PC provision for learners is excellent but its busy environment is not conducive to quiet reflective learning. Our first e-lesson in 2008 ran to three hours! The second time, we radically cut some of the initial inputs and simplified the structure of others.

▲ Learners get what they need through the medium of what they want. Their preference for the freedom of a 'Facebook' style of access to learning is matched with the responsibilities of maintaining individual e-portfolios of uploaded tasks, reflective logs and employability logs, all regularly scrutinised by tutors.

▽ Limited interactivity and drab presentation of e-lessons became boring. It is important to vary delivery methods and channels - e.g. by using video teaching. Subsequent iterations will give the opportunity to build these. We could provide learners with options to bring such media to the PDP.

▲ Blended learning - often seen as the cheap beancounter solution to mass learning - paradoxically solves the problem of the alienated individual in a mass lecture. The safe structures of the VLE and PDP give individuals opportunities to exert choice and show commitment they previously did not have.
▽ We need to find ways of valuing learners' personal investment in and responsibility to their work beyond the demands of summative assessment - e.g. ways to showcase models of good practice in more public fora. A lot of work feels very 'hidden' in the portfolios - e.g. it is viewed only by the learner and the tutor.

Good practice and transferability

- Don't be afraid to revive older, less attractive technology which you may already own/subscribe to but rarely exploit. (One motivator for this can be to look at what it's already costing you in annual subscriptions!) Technology is plumbing: everyone wants plumbing to function ahead of looking pretty.
- The principles here apply to most pan-faculty or pan-institution modules of this type, particularly those involving instrumental skills instruction. Embed, however, within a module; this is not a 'one size fits all' generic quick fix.
- Collaboration is a must. Our impromptu team works spectacularly well because we organise almost entirely through verbal agreement, robustly critique each other and stick like superglue to promises. In two years we have not missed a deadline. The only real paperwork is the PDP itself, and that's virtual. Build your team first and establish exactly what its capabilities are. Don't succumb to a manager - manage yourselves.
- Take an invested resource rather than a service approach. The initiatives won't work perfectly the first time but the resources you carry into the iteration liberate time for upscaling second time around.

Case study 14

Easing cultural transition through peer-to-peer interactions

Katy Mann, Julie Usher and Zoe Devlin,University of York

Scale of initiative:
- ☑ Institution-wide
- ❑ Campus-wide
- ❑ School based
- ❑ Department based
- ❑ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ❑ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Institutional VLE

Key contact:
cfmb500@york.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

This initiative aimed to provide support for international students as they move to a new academic culture and the local environment of the University of York.

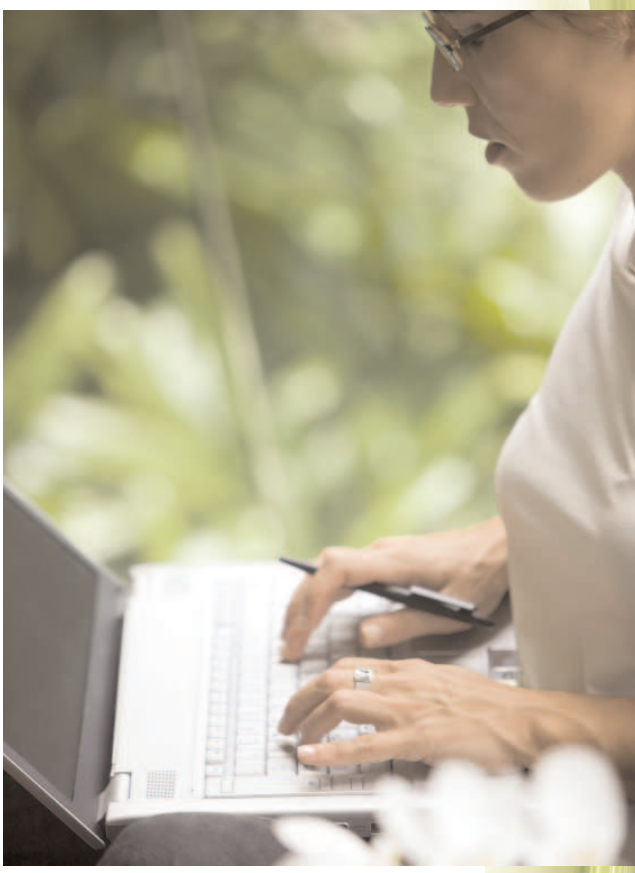
A VLE site is made available to international students over the summer before they arrive at the university. Current international students are involved in developing the site and in providing peer support for the incoming students on the blog. They provide answers to questions about life and study at York, in an informal and supportive environment.

The site also includes information about academic practices in the UK HE context as well as resources to help students develop key skills, including independent study and

academic writing. These resources are supplemented with workshops on a weekly basis through the autumn term, and training is available to students independently of their taught courses.

The support initiative enhances the first year experience for international students by:

- helping them to prepare more effectively for their arrival in the UK
- helping to clarify what might be different about the academic culture in the UK
- helping to minimise culture shock
- helping them to understand what is expected of them in terms of academic study



Scale and resources

The site has been piloted this academic year (2009-10) and involved all incoming international students across the institution - a total of approximately 1,800 students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The pilot also involved a team of eight current students who were involved as bloggers and co-facilitators of the workshops.

The initiative was funded by internal project funding and cost approximately £3,000. Costs included the development of the online resources in the institutional VLE, particularly video, and paying student skill facilitators to co-teach workshops.

Evaluation

The pilot is being evaluated using a survey embedded in the VLE site, as well as through evaluation forms that are given to students on arrival and after each workshop. Interviews and focus groups have been conducted with the students as well as with staff from departments with high numbers of international students. Usage statistics from the VLE site have also been tracked and analysed.

Lessons learnt

Development of the site and resources was done in collaboration with key support departments at York, and initial feedback suggests that this resulted in comprehensive coverage of the issues facing international students. We have also learnt that having student facilitators providing peer support on the blog and co-teaching in the workshops is both effective and popular with the incoming students.

On the VLE site, use of video in interviews with key support staff proved very popular, both for language development and conveying a welcoming and friendly atmosphere.

Good practice and transferability

Top tips would include involving current students, both in developing and reviewing content and in providing peer support. Training of these students is critical to the success of their role in the initiative.

This initiative would be easily transferable to other institutions. Although there is a cost involved in producing high quality resources, particularly video, the students clearly saw a benefit in this.

A number of institutions have expressed an interest in collaborating on developing the site and materials and we are working with them to improve it further.

Case study 15

Develop Me! Support Me! Retain Me!

Becka Currant, University of Bradford

Scale of initiative:
- ☑ Institution-wide
- ☐ Campus-wide
- ☐ School based
- ☐ Department based
- ☐ Module based

Issues being addressed:
- ☑ Transition
- ☐ Retention
- ☑ Progression

Technologies in use:
Institutional VLE, Ning social networking site

Key contact:
r.currant@bradford.ac.uk

Aims and objectives

The aim of our social network is to provide students with an opportunity to meet each other and to become familiar with the university prior to their arrival. Many studies have shown the need for students to develop social relationships with peers, and utilising online methods for this seemed ideal. The idea developed from my own experiences of using online communities to support me through life transitions - e.g. becoming a parent.

In addition, many of our students are based locally and we needed an effective way to enable them to develop relationships with nationally and internationally recruited students.

Our mature student population had also requested help with making links with other students that didn't rely on out-of-hours social activities, due to family and work commitments.

Scale and resources

Develop Me! initially started as a pilot in 2007 in which we engaged a small number of students using discussion forums created in Moodle. Following the success of the pilot, we created a social network using Ning, and this was popular with staff and students. The social network is a university-wide resource which is supported centrally by the web team and the Dean of Students. Schools nominate online administrators (academic and support staff) to create and manage bespoke groups for different cohorts of students.

Develop Me! was initially resourced from external funds (JISC, HEA) but is now supported internally from the central university. The network forms part of our core induction work designed to aid effective transition to university.

Evaluation

Develop Me! has been externally evaluated as part of a number of projects (e.g. JISC, HEA). It is has been incredibly successful and the approach has been adapted and implemented at a number of other HEIs across the world. Key to its success has been the organic development of the online community and responsiveness from the university. Questions posed by students are answered quickly, and it has built up a valuable FAQ resource for all new and prospective students.

Lessons learnt

We have learnt that you need to take calculated risks when setting up an online network. You need to trust the students to manage and participate in the space appropriately. We have found that branding the site has helped enormously, as this helps students feel that they are part of something real and they participate accordingly. We do not get the same level of banal and trivial posts as Facebook does, for example!

Good practice and transferability

We have found the following top tips useful:

- Be flexible
- Be prepared for lots of traffic
- Have a team of people around to answer queries and questions in the weeks between A level results and arrivals
- Be prepared for traffic to diminish once the students arrive on campus
- Be creative in your use of tools: link Twitter and Facebook into the site to increase traffic
- Get staff on board and get them to own their groups in order to minimise workloads for all.

References

Anagnostopoulou, K. & Parmar, D. (2008). 'Practical Guide: Bringing Together e-Learning & Student Retention'. London: Middlesex University. [Online]. Available at: http://mancons2.middlesex.wikispaces.net/Practical Guide [Last accessed 17 April 2009]

Bean, J.P. (1990). 'Why Students Leave: Insights from Research'. In D. Hossler & J.P. Bean (eds), The Strategic Management of College Enrollments. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 147-169.

Breslin, C. and Cullen, D. (2008). 'BIILS Project Landscape Report'. University of Strathclyde: JISC.

Browne, T., Hewitt, R., Jenkins, M. and Walker, R. (2008). '2008 Survey of Technology Enhanced Learning for Higher Education in the UK'. [Online]. UCISA. Available at: http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/publications/~/media/290DD5217DA5422C8775F246791F5523.ashx [Last accessed 28 September 2009].

Chickering, A.W. and Ehrmann, S.C. (1996), 'Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever'. AAHE Bulletin, October, pp. 3-6. [Online]. Available at: http://www.fmtsystems.com/04-news/Impl-7-prin.pdf [Last accessed 5 October 2010)

Cook, A. and Leckey, J. (1999). 'Do Expectations Meet Reality? A Survey of Changes in First-Year Student Opinion'. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 23 (2), 157-171.

Fisher, S. and Hood, B. (1987). 'The Stress of Transition to University: Longitudinal Study of Psychological Disturbance, Absentmindedness and Vulnerability to Homesickness'. Journal of Psychology, 78 (4), 425-441.

Harvey, L., Drew, S. and Smith, M. (2006). 'The First-Year Experience: A Review of Literature for the Higher Education Academy'. Higher Education Academy

JISC and HEA. (2008). 'E-Learning: Benchmarking and Pathfinder Programme 2005-08: An Overview'. [Online]. Available at: http://e-learning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/ea/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/bandpglossyfinal_update19mar09.pdf [Last accessed 28 September 2009].

Kantanis, T. (2000). 'The Role of Social Transition in Students' Adjustment to the First-Year of University'. Journal of Institutional Research, 9(1), 100-110. Available at: http://www.aair.org.au/jir/May00/Kantanis.pdf [Last accessed 19 September 2010]

Keenan, C. (2006). 'Stepping Stones 2HEL: Bridging the Transitional Gap'. HEA Exchange Magazine, 3, 31.

Lefever, R. and Currant, B. (2010) 'How Can Technology be Used to Improve the Learner Experience at Points of Transition? Review of Peer Reviewed Academic Literature, National and International resources and Examples of Projects and Initiatives within Higher Education Institutions Literature'. University of Bradford. [Online]. Available at: http://technologyenhancedlearning.net/files/2010/04/ELESIGliteraturereviewFINAL240210.pdf [Last accessed 25 September 2010]

Mackie, S. (2001). 'Jumping the Hurdles - Undergraduate Student Withdrawal Behaviour'. Innovations in Education and Training International, 38 (3), 265-276.

Maher, A. (2004). 'Learning Outcomes in Higher Education: Implications for Curriculum Design and Student Learning'. Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 3 (2), 46-54.

Martin, E., Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. and Ramsden, P. (2003). 'Variation in the Experience of Leadership of Teaching in Higher Education'. Studies in Higher Education, 28 (3), 247-259.

Ozga, J. and Sukhnandan, L. (1998). 'Undergraduate Non-completion: Developing an Explanatory Model'. Higher Education Quarterly, 52 (3), 316-333.

Parmar, D. and Trotter, E. (2005). 'Keeping our Students: Identifying the Factors that Influence Student Withdrawal and Strategies to Enhance the First Year '. Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences, 1 (3), 149-168.

Prosser, M. and Trigwell, K. (1999). 'Understanding Learning and Teaching: The Experience in Higher Education'. Buckingham: SRHE.

QAA. (2008). 'QAA135 10/06 Institutions' Support for e-Learning'. [Online]. Outcomes from Institutional Audit, Second Series. Available at: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/e-learning.asp [Last accessed 22 September 2009].

QAA, HEA and HEFCE. (2008). 'Quality Enhancement and Assurance - A Changing Picture?' [Online]. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/Events/Past_Events/Documents/QualityEnhancementreport.pdf [Last accessed 22 September 2009].

Ramsden, P. (1998). 'Learning to Lead in Higher Education'. Oxon: Routledge.

Schertzer, C. B. and Schertzer, S. M. B. (2004). 'Student Satisfaction and Retention: A Conceptual Model'. Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 14 (1), 79-91.

Thomas, L. (2002). 'Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Institutional Habitus', Journal of Education Policy, 17 (4), 423-442.

Tinto, V. (1975). 'Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research'. Review of Educational Research, 45, 89-125.

Tinto, V. (1993). 'Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition'. (2nd ed) Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Tinto, V. (2002). 'Establishing Conditions for Student Success: Lessons Learned in the United States'. European Access Network 2002 Keynote. [Online]. Available at: http://faculty.soe.syr.edu/vtinto/Files/European%20Access%20Network%202002%20Keynote.pdf [Last accessed 2 April 2008].

Yorke M. (1999). 'Leaving Early: Undergraduate Non-completion in Higher Education'. London: Falmer.

Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2006). 'The First-Year Experience in Higher Education in the UK'. York: Higher Education Academy.

ISBN 978-1-85924-319-0